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Vulnerability and autonomy: theoretical considerations based on children's narrations about sport in adult-dominated contexts

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Abstract: Starting from the perspective of the new social studies of childhood and their strong focus on agency of children this article follows the critical voices on the agency concept and reconceptualises children's autonomy under conditions of vulnerability. Within the adult dominated field of sport the phenomenon of children's vulnerability as well as children's autonomy can be seen and discussed empirically. The authors analyse what and how children's autonomy is enabled or limited e.g. through organisational aspects or through the superior position of adults. This leads to new findings concerning children's emotional and physical vulnerability, children's decisions about leisure time and adult-free spaces as well as the limitation of children's autonomy. As a conclusion or in the sense of an outlook, thoughts towards theories of professionalism are considered.

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Vulnerability and autonomy. Theoretical considerations based on children's narrations about sport in adult-dominated contexts

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1 Introduction

The meaning of being a child is always different, depending on the context. Likewise, childhood is a historical and culturally specific phenomenon, which can contain various facets at any given time. In a specific society, various childhoods thus exist at the same time, which are each characterised in a different way by social, economic and environmental conditions and become the focus of attention by the public, politics and science. Within the new social studies of childhood, children are seen as a social group and as independent, capable and 'adequate' subjects (see Alanen, 1988, pp. 53ff.; Bühler-Niederberger, 2020, pp. 194ff; Honig, 1999, p. 69; James, 2011, pp. 167ff.). Especially the field of research, which is decisively interested in the children's perspective and is expanding internationally, inter- and transdisciplinarily, has developed significantly within recent decades (see Ben-Arieh, 2014; Betz, 2013; Camfield, Streuli, & Woodhead, 2008; Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2012; Minkkinen, 2013; Veenhoven, 2004) and has become increasingly important in educational science and social work (see Albus, Andresen, Fegter, & Richter, 2009; Andresen, 2014; Andresen & Betz, 2014; Fegter, 2014; Hunner-Kreisel, 2012). The emergence of the children's rights framework and of the new social studies of childhood approach in the field of educational science has stimulated the growing interest in children's narrations, because both frameworks conceptualise children as social actors and as a social group with their own special needs, rights and concepts about a good life (see Andresen, 2013; Hunner-Kreisel & Kuhn, 2010; Stoecklin, 2019). The new social studies of childhood underline the agency of children, considering childhood as a social construction, to which children themselves participate, as they are social actors engaged in interpretive reproduction of the social (see Bühler-Niederberger, 2020; Honig, 2009; Kelle, 2009). Hence, the orientation frameworks of this article are the new social studies of childhood, which have been opposing an adult-centred perspective since the 1980s (see Alanen, 1988). Their central concerns are the representation of children as *subjects* of the research, not as *objects*, and the consideration of children as social actors of their own living environment. Thus, in past decades, the understanding prevailed that childhood is not a phase to prepare for adulthood, but that activities during childhood have independent meanings and can be defined as "practice in its

own right”¹ (Kelle, 2009, p. 465). Accordingly, childhood is formed and reproduced in social practice, including by children themselves (see Kelle, 2009, p. 466). Children are therefore seen as social players, who are independent, acting and active designers of their daily life – and thereby help to construct the distinct ‘life phase of childhood’ (see Bühler-Niederberger, 2020; Honig, 2009). In this context, there is a premise, which is well received in particular in politics, by the public as well as science, namely to give children a voice: “giving voice to children’s voices” (James, 2007, p. 261). Though, questions about their interests and needs in connection with political processes, for example regarding (the limits of) their own possibilities of participation, have moved more strongly into the focus of attention (see Esser, Baader, Betz, & Hungerland, 2016, pp. 2-4; Magyar-Haas, 2017, p. 40).

Thereby, the central position of the concept of agency was, until now, strongly stressed. But in contemporary works on and about the concept of agency, the anthropologisation and ontologisation of the children's status as actors is criticised (see Betz & Esser, 2016, p. 307; Magyar-Haas, 2017, p. 40, 2020b). It is problematic to take children genuinely as autonomous and independent subjects, equipped per se with the ability to act. The agency is thereby essentialised as a pre-social quality of children and not understood as an effect of social relations. In such an essentialist view, social conditions of childhood and the condition of the possibility of agency would receive less attention (see Wihstutz, 2016, p. 62; Magyar-Haas, 2017, p. 40, 2020b). Agency can become impertinent, if the focus lies only on strength and, through this, inabilities and inadequacy would be excluded and vulnerabilities and dependencies would remain unrecognised (see Betz & Esser, 2016, p. 307). Accordingly, “the physical, material and emotional dependencies of children” and thus, “a relational and dynamic connection between social actors and specific contexts” – as Anne Wihstutz (2016, pp. 62-63; see further Magyar-Haas, 2017, p. 40) points out – should be systematically taken into account. Furthermore, agency can be seen as a “result of relationships between different players [...] It arises in networks where, in addition to children, adults and material objects are also interwoven” (Betz & Esser, 2016, p. 309). Hence, an exclusive orientation along the subjective perspectives of children, who are supposed to be strong, is not sufficient for analysing children’s narrations. Children find themselves positioned in generational ordering (see Qvortrup, Corsaro, & Honig, 2009). The concept of generational order refers to the differentiation between children, who are not yet (completely) autonomous social actors, and adults, who are viewed as autonomous social actors (see Bühler-Niederberger, 2020), and is connected with clear hierarchies and power relations. With regard to different asymmetric relations produced by generational ordering, children are dependent on adults (parents, teachers, coaches, social workers etc.), but on peers, too (siblings, fellows, sport colleagues etc.). Against this backdrop, theories of vulnerability have used to a strong degree in childhood studies in recent years, focusing on children’s specific dependency. This perspective attempts reflect social relations and economic conditions as well as emotional dependencies, mental and physical integrity. Further theoretical development allows one to *connect* children’s agency with their restrictions, without overemphasizing one of each side. This could mean being capable of acting even under the conditions of restriction or being vulnerable without losing one’s own autonomy.

¹ Within the chapter we refer to contributions by German academics, whose works are available only in German. The quotes from papers and books have been translated from German into English to the best of our ability.

2 Autonomy and Vulnerability in Childhood

The concept of agency is strongly connected with the terms *autonomy* and *self-determination*. 'Agency' implies within childhood studies that children "play an 'active' role in social life or can exercise autonomy" (Hammersley, 2017, p. 119). The term *autonomy* has been in use since the classical period to describe a state of mind. However, the specific meaning of autonomy and autonomous behaviour has evolved throughout the different historical, cultural and social eras and contexts. During the Enlightenment, this term received special and systematic attention (see Kant, 1785/1999). In the 18th century, it was the core pedagogical principle that, as mature subjects, human beings are capable of exercising self-determination over their present and future. In accordance with Kant, an act is deemed autonomous when it is made freely, is justifiable or can be explained with reason. By this, a sovereign individual subject is assumed with his or her own worth and point of view. On the one hand, in his writings on autonomy, Kant takes over the concept of liberty as self-determination from Jean-Jacques Rousseau (see Reichenbach, 1999, p. 244). On the other hand, he has drawn on the Greek term *auto-nomos* in his concept of self-governance or self-law. The idea that a human being is its own lawgiver links two fundamental terms in the practical philosophy, namely freedom and duty (see Ruschig, n.d., p. 4). The will can be determined by reason insofar as the will is free. Freedom of will exists precisely, because the will is not completely pre-determined by outside influences: "It is in this moment that a human being is free, free from heteronomy in thought and submitted solely to self-set and self-recognised principles, which is then no longer submission at all. Autonomy is self-determination based on objective laws of freedom to make and to obey one's own laws and principles" (Ruschig, n.d., pp. 4-5).

In Kant's argumentation, autonomy is "isomorphic with rationality: ... for him, to be free is to act rationally" (Hammersley, 2017, p. 120). Behind this highly *normative* concept lies the idea of human beings as rational subjects. But autonomy can be seen as a *factual* term, too. This creates a distinction between different degrees of autonomy. Hammersley (2017, p. 119) argues, in factual terms, "children, like adults, must be seen as active in some respects and to some extent, but not in any absolute sense." It is not a question of whether people are autonomous or not, if they are free to act rationally or not. Rather it is necessary to analyse, "from what they are free, and/or what they should be free to do" (Hammersley, 2017, p. 119). Another possibility to develop an alternative to the strong link between autonomy and rationality is offered by the feminist theory. Within this theory, many approaches deal with the concept of autonomy (see Rössler, 2018), in particular in connection with vulnerability (see Mackenzie, Rogers, & Dodds, 2014; Huth, 2016; Magyar-Haas, 2020a).

In her works, the feminist legal theorist Martha Fineman (2010) deals with the relationship of the (neoliberal) state and the demands and expectations of autonomy. With reference to the USA, she states: "In fact, autonomy from state regulation, control, or interference is posited as essential to the realization of individual liberty and freedom of action, even as that freedom has resulted in a diminishing of options and autonomy for many as our society has become more and more unequal" (Fineman, 2010, p. 258). Thereby, it is a specific, namely the traditional interpretation of the concept of autonomy, which expects self-efficacy and independence from the people, which is called upon by the (neoliberal) state and which can hardly be related to vulnerability, neediness and dependence. If this form of autonomy, which is easily instrumentalised especially in (neo)liberal societies, is supported by a broad social class, then it will be hardly possible to assert demands for social benefits and support services. On the contrary, it can be expected that people depending on social benefits are stigmatised (see Lorenz, Magyar-Haas, Neckel, & Schoneville, 2018). To this effect, too much focus on

autonomy of this kind and the demand of personal responsibility associated with this, relieves the state and conceals structural social inequalities and injustice (see Fineman, 2010; Mackenzie, 2014). Against this background, Fineman argues (2010, p. 260): "Autonomy is not an inherent human characteristic, but must be cultivated by a society that pays attention to the needs of its members, the operation of its institutions, and the implications of human fragility and vulnerability. A commitment to equality should not be seen as diminishing the possibilities for autonomy." She therefore recommends to view "through a lens of equality", because autonomy would then "carry social and reciprocal duties to others; it would not be confused with selfishness, self-absorption, and egocentric attention to only one's own circumstances" (Fineman, 2010, p. 261). In doing so, not only the others, but also the state itself would be jointly responsible for providing the conditions and the (institutional, social and economic) requirements, which enable an autonomous life for all and not only the privileged. After all, decisions can only be made in light of certain resources.

Just like Fineman, Catriona Mackenzie also accepts the concept, but with a further shift. She is less concerned with the theoretical argument regarding the state and equality, she is rather looking for the conditions of a "flourishing life in contemporary liberal democratic societies" (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 41). In her view, this includes "both the *capacity* to lead a self-determining life and the *status* of being recognized as an autonomous agent by others" (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 41, emphasis in original; see Rössler, 2018, p. 54). To her, the creation of autonomy as "relational autonomy" means not to think of it individualistically, but to consider the social, political, cultural and economic conditions, which can promote or prevent self-determination and self-esteem (see Mackenzie, 2014, p. 42; Rössler, 2018, pp. 43-57; Magyar-Haas, 2020b).

At this point, regarding the issue of the conditions and contingencies for possible actions, there are analyses regarding vulnerability in the area of childhood studies during recent years (see Andresen, Koch, & König, 2015), which, in connection with the theoretical interpretation of vulnerability, are oriented towards the outlined feminist perspectives (see Andresen, 2016). An ethic, explicitly dedicated to vulnerability and which views the vulnerability within the body as an ontological condition of human being, was referred to by Judith Butler (2010) in 'Frames of War'. She argues that humans are vulnerable, *because* they are exposed to the actions and responses of others – a position, from which Butler derives an ethical obligation to relieve suffering and banish inequality. Beyond the ontological dimension, Butler emphasises the *special vulnerability* of groups that are exposed to political violence, poverty, sickness etc. – and from this develops, also following Martha Fineman (2010), consequences regarding human rights and justice (see Magyar-Haas, 2020a, pp. 227-229).

Connections to this theoretical perspective for *childhood studies* can be seen, where children are considered as an *especially* vulnerable group. Thus, vulnerability within the meaning of "constitutional vulnerability" (Brumlik, 2000, p. 207), is stylised as a characteristic of human existence as well as of childhood: numerous new works on childhood studies discuss vulnerability as a basic dimension and at the same time a consequence of physical and psychological neediness. This special, childhood-specific vulnerability is often explained with generational difference, i.e. with the biographical constitutive asymmetry between the generations (see to this Magyar-Haas, 2020b). In social work in particular, there are countless examples of children becoming vulnerable in institutional settings, and therefore there are not only generational but also institutional conditions of vulnerability (Bühler-Niederberger, 2014; Pomey, 2017). However (see to the following Magyar-Haas, 2020b), research by

Sabine Andresen (2016), Vera King (2015) and Meike Sophia Baader (2015) are starting with the basic assessment that newborns and growing children are dependent on adults in a particular way and that it was this defencelessness and neediness that makes them particularly vulnerable, but they do not stop there. On the contrary, they argue that one should look at the conditions of growing up and also include forms of power, violence and domination in the analyses. These could take different forms, depending on historical, social and cultural constellation – and correspondingly, deal with vulnerability in a positive way or bring about additional forms of vulnerability. With reference to studies by Baader (2015), one would think of phenomena such as the persistently high infant mortality until the end of the 18th century, the exploitation of children as workers during the industrialisation in the 19th century, the sexual exploitation of children in the context of child prostitution, the participation of children in armed conflicts – and at the same time of the establishment of charitable organisations and child welfare organisations, the legally enshrined protection of children, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. All these foundations can be considered as social, legal and political responses to the vulnerability of children. During the course of our qualitative empirical research, we have dealt with the relationship between vulnerability and autonomy in the area of childhood and in this respect, we have selected a sector, which, at first glance, not only does justice to the autonomy of children, but also intends to promote it: the area of sport in an institutionalised framework. This area appears to us as promising, particularly in a (neo-)liberal society and given today's demands on performance and health, as the attitude of this area is presumably affirmative to normative social expectations. Simultaneously, there is thus a risk that especially in this area, vulnerability is overlooked.

3 Children's narrations about sport

For children, sport is a relevant activity, which is presented to them equally by parents, schools and sports clubs. Engaging in a type of sport is particularly popular within the framework of institutionally organised sport, requiring a lot of time and resources. Among other things, power asymmetries hereby become relevant, for example in view of the generationally organised relationships between children and their coaches, or regarding the spaces, where children can learn about freedom of choice and freedom of action. There can also be various kinds of conflicts, such as between protection and control, welfare and discipline as well as autonomy and dependence (see Sünder, 2010, p. 77). Sport is becoming important on a physical, mental and systematic level. It is promoted by parents and institutions, for health or social reasons among others, and is also identified by children themselves as central activity. A certain way of addressing this topic is arising in discourse, which considers sport and exercise as beneficial to the physical, emotional and mental development of children. As a “medium of promotion of health” (Cachay & Thiel, 2000, p. 166), sport can also provide a relevant contribution to subjective well-being (see for example Rees & Main, 2015). With an analytical focus on the economic orientation of social investment, which considers children as human capital, the call to engage in sport and exercise also points towards in the feeding of children into economic legalities such as performance, efficiency and competition, which can be seen particularly in the context of *competitive* sport (see Bühler-Niederberger, 2010, p. 25; Hendrick, 2010, p. 50; Lange, 2010, p. 92). While in competitive sport, for example, emphasis is placed on competitive performance in terms of the code of victory and defeat, the motives behind mass sports are more related to health, social life and leisure activities (see Cachay & Thiel, 2000, p. 134), although even here the notion of performance and competition is not completely eliminated. The report by Markus Lamprecht, Adrian Fischer, Doris Wiegand and Hanspeter Stamm

(2015) on children and young people in Switzerland confirms the relevance of a positive perception of social motives. For sporting activities in Switzerland for children aged ten to fourteen, 'fun' is named as a very important factor by two thirds (see Lamprecht, Fischer, Wiegand, & Stamm, 2015, p. 19).

On an institutional level, apart from sport in sports clubs, school sports are also pertinent. The requirement to take sporting activities at school aims to provide all pupils with an offering of exercise that is marked and aimed at an increase in performance, but also a generic exercise programme. Sports clubs are more inclined to work with groups that reach homogeneous achievement levels and are more geared towards exclusivity, specialisation and selection than school sports. Advice to parents suggests that families should engage in sport and exercise to promote and ensure the fulfilment children's basic needs during early childhood. The activities offered by sports clubs represent – alongside exercise activities in the family and at school as well as numerous self-organised informal exercise activities – only a part of children's exercise culture, but, due to its extracurricular and also institutionalised character dominated by adults, it forms our set context of our study.

So, the initial question of our empirical research project is: What do children tell us about the importance of sport in their everyday life?² This question is a partial question of research interest in children's understanding of well-being and it is processed within the framework of the international, qualitatively oriented research network Children's Understandings of Well-being (www.cuwb.org; Fattore, Fegter, & Hunner-Kreisel, 2019). The interview includes open and non-suggestive questions about dimensions that are important for the child, such as people, activities, places and the importance of sport in their lives. Hence with the semi-narrative interview a method is chosen that evokes narrative passages which alternate with enquiring passages using child-oriented, narrative-stimulating methods. The semi-structured interview guide serves as an orientation for the interviewers, but does not restrict the spontaneous formulation of open questions. For the analyses with a focus on vulnerability and autonomy we used guided interviews with four children between eleven and twelve years old who are members of a regional football club. Prior to the interview, the children could take photos of people, places, things and activities, which are important to them, using a camera we made available to them. These photos were used as lead-ins during the different stages of the interview. We employed the Grounded Theory methodology for the project (see Equit & Hohage, 2016; Flick, 2010; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1996; Strübing, 2014).

For the following reconstructions and analyses we focused on the question: How can the connection between autonomy and vulnerability be captured empirically?

3.1 Emotional vulnerability in taking part in sports

The interrelationship between vulnerability and autonomy is shown in and by way of the emotions that become clear in the context of sport. *Group* emotions such as pleasure and pride or disappointment and grief depend on victory and defeat in a game affect the whole team. Tim also talks about the fact that he was happy when his team won and that he then did not feel the tiredness or that he was disappointed when they lost. The team can lose despite good

² The interviews analysed for this essay were part of a research seminar at the University of Zurich. The interviews were held by Morad Salah and Valentin Mettler and analysed with the view of the question of the significance of sport for children's well-being.

individual performances; the individual player is therefore dependent on the collective body (Tim L. 222-224). *Individual* emotions in sport are particularly displayed in four dimensions. Firstly, emotions are generated during the game itself: It is enjoyable or fun or leads to disappointment. Secondly, sport offers the opportunity to unwind, to let it all out (Thomas, L. 289-290). It allows one to let off steam and push oneself within a regulated framework. Thirdly, sport can increase the feeling of self-efficacy. Damien talks about how he 'would help the club' (L. 406). By participating in a club sport and his own engagement, he feels able to support the club and thus the collective body. Finally, the fourth dimension is humiliation. Thomas tells about test training in a stronger team, where the peers did not show any forgiveness for errors and would humiliate you if you made a mistake: "if someone makes a mistake or something like that, then they laugh about him and stop" (L. 123-126).

What evokes emotions in children in this context and makes them vulnerable is the expectation of performance. If a child does not meet such expectations and is not able to achieve or maintain the level of performance required externally or internally, he or she is criticised, possibly during a discussion: here, what did not go well during the game or, where there was an individual failure is discussed in front of everyone (Jan, L. 269-273). Beyond this, the vulnerable position as player, due to being exposed, is displayed in the dependence of the other players, who may laugh at someone who makes a mistake, insult him/her and don't let him or her carry on playing, or who can provide support and motivation (L. 126-129).

In club sports, there is a certain obligation to regularly participate in training, although the sport (as a hobby) was initially freely chosen. This means that the initial free decision to pursue a particular sport also leads to a certain commitment to be present, which greatly restricts the autonomy of the individual child. Thomas talks about the fact that "you don't just fail to turn up for training, you need good reasons such as illness or injury" (L. 144-147). Damien emphasises that, due to training four times during the week and one to two matches at the weekend, he has hardly any free time (L. 241-244). Once you are a member, it seems, you can no longer decide on your participation as you please. The restriction of autonomy here relates to time management, but also on what can be expressed. In this context, Damien emphasises in his story the training camp as a place, where "commands were given" (L. 383) and "you always had to do what was said" (L. 382). Children are thus also exposed to the rules and common language of adults, which they must follow.

3.2 Physical vulnerability in correlation with autonomy

In addition to this vulnerability relating to emotions and participation, there is also a physical vulnerability, as there is a risk of injury in the event of foul or unfair play. Tim distinguishes between training with colleagues and a match with opponents: If there was a foul during training, you were fine with each other afterwards (Tim, L. 201-203); at a match, Tim would retaliate with a contra foul, if he was angry. Due to the potential vulnerability of the body, the players are open to attack and at the same time, exposed to the others and the game together with its rules. Damien describes this physical vulnerability to injury that is potentially always present on the playing field in connection with a loss of autonomy: „if it is really bad than I usually stay on the floor, because it really hurts [...] ehh then I try to get up and limp off the playing field" (Damien, L. 525-532). While, during a foul, the player tries to intervene in the autonomy of the 'fouled person' to play fair, the physical pain caused by the foul play further reduces the autonomous action of the 'fouled person', and hampers them in their efforts to get up again. The pain literally pushes Damien to the ground. Thomas was also injured by bad foul play and directed by others in his player's autonomy. Unfair foul play against the

opposing player causes a personal injury, resulting in Thomas having to leave the match and sit on the substitutes' bench. Furthermore, he emphasises the 'in and out of the match' with regard to vulnerability: if he is injured, he must stay on the sidelines and this differs from participating in the game (see L. 424-435).

3.3 Generational order and limitation of children's autonomy

The vulnerability of the children (as children) is also demonstrated in their position within the generational order. The parental decision-making power is also visible as a form of limitation of childhood autonomy in the empirical material. Thomas has always liked to play football, even in the house. As, however, various objects were broken, his mother bought him a soft ball to play football, to enable him to continue playing indoors ("plush football") (L. 72-76). Consequently, he does not experience any restriction regarding the place or the action (doing), but only in relation to the object. The decision, which ball he can use to play is taken away from him, but this does not apply to the opportunity to continue playing indoors.

So, the question is to what extent children have a choice about what they would like to do and where, because children experience self-efficacy when making choices. This can be seen in their accounts of situations, in which they had to persuade their parents of something. The following accounts of autonomy demonstrate the unequal balance of power in child-parent relations, with the latter having more power and thus more decision-making authority.

In this sense, Jan gives us a narration about a positive mutual decision with his father (L. 81-93): Initially, Jan's father did not want his son to go to football training. This refusal was due to preconceived notions, for example that football seems to him superficial and nothing, but a show. Over the course of time, Thomas shared his own thoughts with his father and the father was able to understand how important football was to his son. As a result of the child's persuasive efforts, the father allowed him to go to the football training. These power relations are shown as asymmetries between adults and children in form of a "generational order" (Alanen, 2009, p. 161). In Jan's example, this power gap can be mitigated somewhat by the father's cooperation, but cannot be completely resolved. A narration with a negative result and without a mutual decision is also told by Jan (L. 175-185): In the interview Jan says that he wanted to change football clubs, because he was asked by another club and because his friend was playing there, too. But, in his view, his parents used a delaying tactic, perhaps as a review of the child's desire and to avoid a short-circuit decision. According to Jan they tell him: "You can't change clubs right now, but we can talk about it again in a year" (L. 182). The aim here was a collective decision in order to sublimate the child's position. In another sequence Jan describes a conversation with his father. Jan raises his wish to become a professional footballer. His father is opposed to this idea and demands from his son that he first obtains some qualifications (Jan, L. 281-288). On the one hand, this can be taken as a restrictive parental interference regarding the professional wishes of the children, where the parents are able to influence their future. On the other hand, this can also be taken as protection by the parents from decisions whose implications they are not yet able to predict.

This aspect of the generational order points to questions of power and hierarchy. Following Bourdieu's (2001) reflections on power and domination, the quasi-self-evident adoption of the existing structures by the next generations and their almost self-evident internalization, Doris Bühler-Niederberger (2020, p. 239) shows that children basically accept the given (generational) order and thus become – in Bourdieu's sense – passive accomplices of power. Children fit more or less smoothly into the generational order with its distribution of rights

and duties and thus accept – sometimes more, sometimes less – what is granted to them. To point out the active participation of children in the reproduction of the generational order, Bühler-Niederberger (2020, p. 238) expands the concept of complicity and speaks of “competent compliance”: “In the case of children, complicity means that children not only accept a generational order, even though this limits their range of action, but that they cooperate in its constant structuring and restructuring. Beyond mere adaptation, this means performances that consist in recognising the desired arrangement, in taking over the part presumably intended for one's own person or group, in supporting the others in their parts and in feeling ‘satisfied’ with the arrangement completed in this way” (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020, p. 238). It can be seen in the generational order that the responsibility and final decision – for example, to play either sport A or sport B – lies with the parents (Jan, L. 101-129 & L. 175-185). This shows the more vulnerable position of children, because of less autonomy in relation to their parents. But children are even logistically dependent on their parents, too, in certain situations, such as having to be driven to and from sporting activities (Jan, L. 310-314). In their view this is helpful, it enables them to practise their hobby, to play football, but at the same time it creates pre-defined boundaries and allows them to experience little self-determination. When the distance to club sports is too big for children to go there on their own, this limits their ability to act. Being driven contributes in this case to autonomy, just with restrictions.

Thomas' experience to take up kung fu again, which he practiced in the past, after having stopped according to his own wishes some time ago, is different, but is nonetheless associated with having little say. His freedom to decide is shown here as well as his autonomy to quit, as apparently he was able to give up kung fu without any problems. Now, he would like to start kung fu again or take up karate in addition to football. His mother however, is giving him the limiting choice to practice either only kung fu or to play football. She justifies this with the logistical dependence and the driving she is taking on for him and his brother, who also plays football (L. 104-115). The freedom of choice rests with the child, but it is a limited freedom and not very satisfying for him.

3.4 Organisational aspects and children's autonomy

The previous example already demonstrated that organisational aspects also play a role in children's autonomy and restrictions: the location, in particular the distance; the proximity of the football club to the family home is a deciding aspect for where the child plays football. Examples of this are “near our house” (L. 280-283), “close to home” (Jan, L. 198-199) and the reference to long journeys being too exhausting for the child. For the interviewed children, the football field is a stone's throw from the family home (L. 183-185). The proximity of the football club to the family home is the reason to play there (L. 101-129), not the quality of the club.

Football training takes place indoors or in the sport hall, when it rains (L. 40-45). This provides the opportunity to play despite bad weather, but with a different result: “In the hall, I simply feel that you are somehow a bit – you are limited and when you are outside, then you can see far and you always have – I have a totally different feeling when I play” (Jan, L. 207-209). The fact that restrictions have to be accepted is due to the weather as well as conflicting time schedules: training for another sport cannot be attended, because football training takes place at the same time (L. 40-45).

3.5 Autonomy and making decisions when submitting to authority figures

Now we will briefly look at the possibility of perceiving submission to force and authority figures as an autonomous decision. Can following rules or doing something they 'have to' be interpreted as an autonomous act? There are different types of authority children are expected to submit to, each with different characteristics: *institutionalised* authority, in positions such as teacher or coach, seems to be the only type of authority, from which the child is less willing to accept 'having to' do something. For example, one child told us that he "always had to do what they [the coaches] said. They really, um, bossed me about" (L. 378). This was the reason for him changing to another football club. *Professional* and *personal* authority, in the sense of competence as well as understanding and empathy, contribute rather to a child's acceptance of submission. One child said that good coaches are "ones [...] who, when they say you've done something dumb, they can also explain it to you" (Thomas, L. 322-327). The *generational* authority includes siblings, coaches, teachers and parents. As a further authority we identified the authority of the *objects* or of the *game itself*. The children's responses reveal that the game itself can be demanding: "I didn't realise back then that you have to practice" (Thomas, L. 270-272). The self-discipline experienced by practising something for hours can result in situations in play, where children recognise their own efforts, which children deem important for their well-being.

3.6 Autonomy and making decisions about leisure time and adult-free spaces

In this part we demonstrate, where and how children are allowed to help organise their lives outside of school and training. Thomas, for example, uses a specific area when he is in a public space (tarmacked yard with wall), where he can play and practise football independently and alone (L. 277-279). This gives him a lot of autonomy to pursue his hobby. Children also cite the digital sphere as such a place of autonomy, which is subject to less control by adults. Children are able to be self-determined within a digital space, for instance on YouTube or when playing computer games. This was also perceived as an opportunity for children to put distance between themselves and adults. Their own devices, such as a tablet (Thomas, L. 261-265) or a games console (Damien, L. 572-592), are viewed as spaces, where they are able to act autonomously once they have permission from siblings or parents to use them. For instance, one child described how he practised tricks for several hours on his own, using instructions from a YouTube video (Thomas, L. 258-283). Such an experience of self-discipline and personal responsibility, like "practising the same trick for hours on end" and "sometimes it really got a bit much" as an experience of self, contributes to the feeling of autonomy when organising leisure time.

For some of the children, other activities besides football training are of pivotal importance, as can be clearly seen in the following interview sequence. To the question, if the children also do other things together outside of training, Damien says:

"we mostly also go back behind the school, play football or [...] Just hang out a bit. [...] Game a bit at home@ // I: What games do you play? // Um, FIFA [...] it's @fun@ gaming with them. // I: And, and do you feel good when you game? // D: Yes. Well, when I game too much then, umm, I just have to stop. Then go home and study a bit for school. [...] And, yeah, when I study for, like, half an hour then it's cool" (L. 572-592).

Damien differentiates between playing football *during training* and playing football *on the grounds behind the school*. All the activities mentioned ('hanging out', 'gaming') take place in a space free of adults or with little adult interference. This creating of their 'own' space is

important to the children. In this space, they are amongst themselves and are able to make their own choices and rules about how to play. There is also room to do nothing ('hang out'). He also associates 'gaming' with 'fun' and seems to experience autonomy in this adult-free digital space, because the only parental interference is the amount of time set for gaming. The responses regarding not playing too long ('half an hour' as the norm) and, as a contrast, 'go home and study a bit for school', emphasise socially desired behaviour. This could be interpreted that the child is submitting themselves to a rule and tries to find "thin" autonomy (see Hammersley, 2017, p. 119). Finally, stopping the activity is described as a matter of course, as an established norm ('I just have to').

On the other hand, children create their own play spaces in a football training situation as well, which is by definition dominated by adults, i.e. by the presence of the coach. Children tell us that they have the chance to "joke around" (Damien, L. 624) with each other in the changing room, to which coaches and parents do not normally have access. So, this is a place and space beyond the generational order within the context of training where the children feel unattended and uncontrolled. So, what we see is a tension between freedom and submission. The sequence shows that children interpret freedom as having spaces, where they are able to act autonomously and with self-determination – with limited or no parental interference. As we already well know, both freedom and autonomy are pivotal for a sense of well-being. With respect to sport, we could identify a *double structure*: on the one hand, the participation in sporting activities is voluntary and a desire of the child. On the other hand, within the sport context there are certain rules of participation, the demand of a good performance, group dynamics and requirements of the coach which generate a coercive context, under which the child has to subordinate if he or she wants to take part. Hence, we could speak of a tension or simultaneousness between freedom and submission, autonomy and coercion. We can conclude from this sequence that the children very positively view their experiences of self-efficacy and autonomy in a playing context, which they have created themselves, but it is within the pre-defined boundaries set by parents. In the following section, we will address the question of whether submission, force and norms restrict autonomy and adversely affect well-being.

The 'laws' one makes for oneself can be understood as authorities, which one voluntarily submits to on rational grounds. In our empirical interviews, a strong and 'classic', Kantian interpretation of autonomy (Kant, 1785/1999; Rössler, 2018, pp. 30-36) from the context of philosophical idealism reaches its limits. Against this backdrop and based on the systematic analysis of the perspectives of the interviewed children, we can say that the children's sporting activities take place within fixed boundaries, which are pre-defined and pre-determined by parents and coaches. We saw in the interviews that sport was a standard part of a weekly routine, resembling an obligation more than a self-determined leisure activity. Yet, it was also possible for the children to experience autonomy and self-efficacy within this fixed framework, for instance in situations, where they used their own reason to come up with arguments for playing football instead of another sport and convinced their parents to change their minds. Equally worthy of note is that not one of the children brought up the topic of resistance. None of them talked about how it is or would be, when they do not want to go to training. They seem to submit themselves to authority, the expectations and the rules of their parents, the coach or the game itself, perhaps because they see reason behind the rules, and maybe even agree with them. Some decisions are out of their control: the weather, cancelled training sessions, sickness, etc. But even in uncontrollable situations children can have "relational autonomy" (see Rössler, 2018, pp. 53-55; Mackenzie, 2014). This is also reflected

in the way such situations are negotiated. As can be seen from our empirical material, the means of handling situations and relationships in sporting contexts are perceived as being flexible, accessible, negotiable and structured by power relations.

Since the study has its roots in the area of (competitive) sport, which is also governed by heteronomous aspects, we are going to end this paper by looking at the question of whether it is justifiable to limit someone's autonomy. When, what types and with what good reason do encroachments on children's autonomy seem justifiable? This question of granting and limiting autonomy requires ethical issues as well as theories of professionalism, which we will discuss in the following section.

4 Considerations towards theories of professionalism

Pedagogy and Education take place in formal, non-formal and informal settings e.g. in private family settings, schools, and sport clubs. The difference between educating children in a private family setting and in a public school or sport setting is the State's educational expertise and professional knowledge, which more or less forms the basis of public programmes. As we know, this professionalism is geared towards establishing or re-establishing personal autonomy – or, as we saw in our analysis, attaining and preserving the autonomy of the clients, the children or the students.

Professionalism is defined by Ulrich Oevermann (1996, p. 122) as “the forging of a lively, longer-term relationship in a working alliance between whole human beings”. An interpretation of this statement is, that clients in both structural and hierarchical professional situations ought to be recognised as equal interaction partners, which is virtually contrary to fact. Oevermann's definition of autonomy is not as idealistic as Kant's. Oevermann defines autonomy as being able to shape one's life by making decisions based on the opportunities at hand. This means that the autonomous subject creates autonomy by reflecting on its wishes and plans – by exploring itself, the life it lives and future possibilities. In this sense Oevermann's definition is close to the analytical suggestions of Fineman (2010), Mackenzie (2014) and Rössler (2018).

In his *Advocatory Ethic*, Micha Brumlik refers to Oevermann in this respect, maintaining that human integrity should be at the heart of professional conduct, with the core idea being to preserve or restore self-respect. A person has self-respect, when his or her physical integrity is intact and when he or she receives recognition and appreciation for his or her actions. However, pedagogical or social work intervention are often made against the will of the client – i.e. the child or student – just like parents' and coaches' interventions and decisions. This issue is referred to as paternalism in social work. The relevant question is, whether it is justifiable to “try to stop others against their will from doing harm to themselves and/or force their personal development in a direction that is generally accepted by society” (Brumlik, 1992, p. 232). Paternalistic actions interfere with an individual's freedom by using force with the justification that it is for his or her own good (see Mackenzie, 2014, p. 47). This becomes very clear in our empirical reconstruction, for example, when parents argue towards the children with their future choices and successes, when they formulate that they want to protect the child from overburdening demands or minimize its vulnerability. At the same time, the children in our study also report that the parental restriction of their options and actions is justified by logistical difficulties and preconceived opinions. Yet to what extent is it justifiable from an educational standpoint to paternally interfere in situations, where human beings – particularly clients, children or anyone under guardianship – are not living their lives

on the basis of reasonable decisions and to influence them to live a life “grounded in reason” (Brumlik, 1992, p. 237)? Crucial to answering this question is the *aim* of paternalistic actions. If their aim is to influence ‘personal beliefs or character’, then they are hardly justifiable. On the other hand, if their aim is to promote “a way of life, in which one takes responsibility for one’s actions and uses reason” (Brumlik, 1992, p. 246), then it is justifiable – or even a duty – to provide support in the form of education and emancipation. This should – like Brumlik (1992, p. 246) argues – enable people to live a good life grounded in reason, or to provide support in the form of therapy or rehabilitation, thus enabling a return to such a life. In addition to this legitimization of paternalistic interventions, which is based more on Kantian theory, Mackenzie (2014, p. 55; see also Magyar-Haas, 2020b) argues that all forms of protection and support for human beings – and in this sense socio-pedagogical as well as socio-political interventions – are only justified if they deal with the vulnerability of persons in such a way that they do not restrict the possibilities for autonomous action. In this sense, it is essential for professional action to work with vulnerable persons in a way that recognises them as equal citizens and promotes and expands their autonomy.

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